

Self-Care *Health Message*



Self-Care: Making Good Health Decisions

Our ideas about health and what we “know” about ourselves help us decide how to take care of ourselves. Self-care includes helpful, practical ways to use what we and others know to achieve good health. It includes knowing how to take better care of yourself, deciding when to see a professional, getting organized for health, and becoming more active in your own medical care.

- Making good self-care decisions and actions can
- reduce your risks of illness,
- help to reduce your medical costs, and
- help you learn about possible alternatives.

If you think about it, taking care of your body is a lot like taking care of your automobile. Even though there are important differences, the types of care could fall into similar categories.

- Watch gauges and dials.
Fever or a sudden loss of weight can signal that it is time to take action.
- Take care of routine maintenance.
Regular checkups, including appropriate screenings, should be scheduled.
- Fix minor problems.
There are health problems you can take care of at home (small cuts or burns, minor headaches).
- Hire a professional when needed.
See the doctor when necessary.
- Call for emergency service.
Go to the emergency room when necessary.

Talk with Your Doctor

Make a list of questions to take with you to your doctor visit. Be assertive and ask lots of questions, but listen to the answers, too! Be sure to take a note pad to jot down notes about what your doctor says. Be honest with your doctor. Tell him/her if you don't plan to take a medicine (for example, because it is too expensive or has side effects).

Ask about alternative treatments and what chance of success people usually have with different treatments. Ask why the doctor recommends a particular treatment for you and what you can expect if you do nothing. You have the right to ask for good healthcare. Ask questions about medicines, screening tests, immunizations, prevention, and chief complaints. Most importantly don't forget to schedule routine visits for preventive care.

Communication about your medication is very important! Take a list of medications to every doctor you see, or, better yet, take the medications in a bag with you to each visit. Include over-the-counter medicines and nutritional supplements, as well.

Main Steps to Good Self-Care

The self-care process is a continuous one. Once the problem is recognized, the next step is to observe the problem. You need to be able to describe the problem.

- When did it begin?
- What are the symptoms?
- Is discomfort present?
- Is it steady or occasional?
- How bad is it?
- Are there any unrelated problems?
- Have you had this problem before? If so, what was done for the problem? Did it work?
- Have you experienced recent life changes, such as increased stress, changes in foods, new medicines, changes in exercise, or injury?

The next step is to learn more about the problem. There are several ways to gather more information about a health problem. A healthcare professional or a good health reference book can help. A good health reference book should provide an index with listings of symptoms. The reference guide should not replace the doctor. You can check the author or contributor's credentials by determining if they are board-certified in the specialty area they address. Some good online sources are *Medlineplus.gov*, *WebMD.com*, and *cdc.gov*.

Take time to think about the information you have gathered. Then learn about the possible options and make a plan to obtain the best care possible. When you have learned more about the problem, it's time for action, which may include treating yourself at home, watching for specific signs, and learning when to consult a health professional. Sometimes the best care is at home, and sometimes you need professional healthcare or a combination of both.

No matter what your plan, be alert to changes. For example, a cough may be the result of a common cold, but shortness of breath may signal a more serious problem. Know the normal progression of a common problem, and consult a doctor anytime you have doubts.

Some situations should not be taken care of with the self-care process. It is important to look for signs of an urgent or emergency condition. Emergency help, not self-care, should be sought if the problem interferes with breathing, circulation, or mental function; is related to anything poisonous; or is causing severe pain. When minutes count, administer first aid and call an ambulance, usually 911. For information about first aid for poisoning, call a Poison Control Center. If you don't think the problem is serious enough to call 911, you may have an urgent problem (for example, when hours count, not minutes). In this case, you should call your doctor for advice or go to an urgent care center.

Taking good self-care measures today can lead to a healthier you!

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